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Picturesque Faulknerisms

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PICTURESQUE FAULKNERISMS

by George W. Boswell

During the 1960's, with the single exception of Mark Twain, no American author has stimulated the production of more scholarly research than William Faulkner. Principal areas of treatment have been contributions to his biography, study of his fictional techniques, and the content and philosophy of his work. As he was also a master of language—representation of dialect and coinage of word and phrase—this paper will attempt to display some of this mastery and trace its origins under eight headings: pronunciation, names, diction, morphology, figurative language, syntax, titles of his books and short stories, and proverbial expressions.

As rendered by Faulkner, Southern Negro and poor-white pronunciation is characterized by four principal divergencies from standard English: omission of certain consonants, especially the *r;* substitution of certain vowels for others; omission of entire syllables; and certain intrusive consonants. The *r* is dropped in bob-wire *(The Hamlet),* liberry *(The Mansion),* reservoy *(Uncle Willy),* to'a'ds for towards *(Sartoris),* and the following Negro words: kahysene for kerosene *(Dr. Martino),* cuiser for curiouser *(The Sound and the Fury),* and Mo' for Moore *(Sartoris).* The idiot Ike Snopes is made to pronounce his name as would a two-year-old child: H-mope *(The Hamlet).* The most prominent substitution among strong vowels is [ɔ] for [a]: Tawm for Tom *(Absalom, Absalom!),* Pawmp for Pomp *(Light in August),* Fawhrest for Forrest *(Uncle Willy),* mawkery *(A Fable),* and quoilin for quarreling *(The Sound and The Fury).* Others include [a] for [æ], as in Moster *(The Mansion),* wropped *(The Reivers),* and norrer-asted *(The Reivers);* [ɛ] for

[e] as in nekid for naked *(The Hamlet);* [au] for [ai] as in mought*(Absalom, Absalom!);* [ʌ] for [u] as in sut for soot *(The Town);* [i] for [ī] as in nigras for Negroes *(Intruder in the Dust);* [ɛ] for [ʌ] as in shet *(The Sound and the Fury);* [æ] for [ɔ] as in hant *(Go Down, Moses);* [ɛ] for [i] as in twell and resk *(Uncle Willy);* [ʌ] for [a] as in cuckleburs *(The Mansion);* [o] for [u] as in sho *(The Hamlet);* and [ʌ] for [ɛ] as in trustle *(A Fable).* Murry Falkner, William's brother, reports that their grandfather, the model for Old Bayard Sartoris, said *air* for *are,*[1] and hurricane is rendered harrykin. Waggin for wagon *(Miss Zilphia Gant)* demonstrates that unstressed vowels may diverge from standard pronunciation.

Many entire syllables are omitted, as in spurts for spirits *(Notes on a Horsethief),* twell for until *(The Sound and the Fury),* Miz for Mrs. *(The Town),* Shurf for Sheriff *(Intruder in the Dust),* 'voce for divorce *(Go Down, Moses),* and gempmuns *(Dr. Martino).* Occasionally one consonant will be substituted for another, as in get shed of *(Uncle Willy).* Examples of intrusive consonants are as follows: *r* in winders and elbers *(The Hamlet); y* in colyums *(The Mansion),* centawyer for centaur *(The Town),* and vilyun *(The Sound and the Fury); w* in twell for until, as cited above; *b* in chimbley *(The Town);* and *t* in rear-backted *(Knight's Gambit),* pie-face-ted *(Sanctuary),* and norrer-asted, as cited above. Over-elegant efforts at pronunciation result in some humor, especially as performed by V. K. Ratliff: a-teelyer, dee-neweyment, eupheemism, eefeet, and decorious *(The Mansion).*

Proper names in Faulkner's works are of five types: place names, surnames, first names, nicknames, and, by slight stretching of definition, epithets. Of place names his most famous example is that for his imaginary county, Yoknapatawpha. It is derived from the river that flows south of Oxford, Yoconopatawpha, from the Chickasaw Indian, which is now called Yocona and pronounced Yokny. Family names, cannily appropriate, in his works have three kinds of origin: local sur-

[1] Murry C. Falkner, *The Falkners of Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 7.

names, allegory, and physical sound. MacCallum, Varner, and Shegog are familiar in Lafayette County. John Cullen showed how an Oxford figure prominent in history, Jacob Thompson, provided an easily metathesized Jason Compson;[2] there was a local Senator Snipes; and a young Sartoris attended school in Sardis in neighboring Panola County. Allegorical significance can be demonstrated in such surnames as Meadowfill, Christmas, Hightower, Grove, and perhaps Bundren (Bunyan's burden) and Bascomb (base-come), and etymology in Workitt ("on a wood"), Quick ("cow farm"), Edmonds ("rich protector"), and Compson ("hollow estate"). Ironically Gowrie, who was a farmer, bears a name that meant metal-worker; McCallum a name that meant "son of a dove-like one"; and Popeye Vitelli, who was born half-dead, never wholly achieved vitality, and dealt death with his pistol, a name that means life. As for the stigma of sound, Faulkner himself comments in *Intruder in the Dust* and *Requiem for a Nun* on the folk-etymologized degeneracy of such surnames as Mannigoe, Weddel, Workitt, Ingrum, and Grinnup. Flem Snopes is in a class to himself: his name connotes phlegm, spit, suffocation, snipe, snake, snoop, rope, nope, mopes blended together via all the kinds of origin that we have been considering.

Out of the welter of personal names among Faulkner's twelve hundred characters, some few generalizations can be drawn. His Indian names are either untranslated or translated Chickasaw: Ikkemotubbe, Moketubbe, and Issetibbeha on the analogy of existing names like Pistonatubbe, Noosahkatubby, and Tobetubbe, this last a creek just west of Oxford; and "Sometimes-Wakeup," Three Basket, and Had-Two-Fathers. From literature, history, and commerce we get Thucydus (McCaslin), Raphael Semmes MacCallum, and Watkins Products Snopes. In recognizable ways the etymology of some Christian names may describe their bearers: Tobe, God is good; Abner, father is fire; Gavin, hawk of battle; Lucas, light; Maury, dim twilight. On the other hand, as many exert ironic comment: Benjy, "the son of my right hand"; Eustace (Grimm), tranquil, stable; Temple,

[2] John B. Cullen in collaboration with Floyd C. Watkins, *Old Times in the Faulkner Country* (Chapel Hill, N. C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), p. 80.

place of God's worship; Eupheus, attractive and well-balanced; Jason, healer; and Jesus, Nancy's husband, saviour. Mink (Snopes), not a nickname, suggests the bearer's character; Wash Jones's murder of Sutpen cleanses the country of Sutpen's sin; and Darl, whose name means darling and who is the only Bundren capable of love, excites the implacable hatred of all his kindred.

Nicknames are derived either from the first name of a character or, more picturesquely, from his appearance, nature, or activities. Examples of the first method are Loosh, Rat, Res (from Orestes), Roth (from Carothers), Clytie, Vangie, 'Philus, Possum (folk etymology from Parsham), and Ringo (Marengo). As John Faulkner tells us, Jack Falkner's efforts as a child to pronounce their brother William's name resulted in "Memmie."[3] Other origins of nicknames are family relationship ("Damuddy," Dad's mother [?], profession (Doc, and Picklock in *A Fable),* insult (Monk Odlethrop), irony (Uncle Bud in *Sanctuary,* a child), age (old Man One Hundred and One McCaslin), physical description (Uncle Hog-Eye Mosby and Nub Gowrie), and Place of Business in the Roots of a Tree (Mulberry in *Requiem for a Nun* and Sickymo in *Go Down, Moses).*

Obscurity, ambiguity, and name taboo combined to cause Faulkner often to employ epithets in reference to certain characters. That name taboo was attractive to his nature is illustrated by an incident in the circulating library of the Gathright-Reed drugstore in Oxford. One day he was seen scanning the slips in the books. When queried by the attendant, David Ross, he said: "I'm just looking through these cards to see if I accidentally signed one of them, because one of these days my signature will be famous and I don't want it on one of these cards."[4] In *The Hamlet* Mrs. Mink Snopes is identified as "the untidy mass of bleached hair"; in "Ad Astra" the epithets are illustrative of the origin of surnames: "Comyn with his bloodshot pig's eyes, Sartoris with his white nostrils"; and repeatedly

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[3] John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill* (New York: Trident Press, 1963), p. 51.

[4] Personal communication.

in *A Fable* the Quartermaster-General is identified only by his description: "A man with a vast sick flaccid moon of a face and hungry and passionate eyes."

Faulkner's sharp ear for words and imaginativeness in their creative employment may be illustrated under eight headings: dialect, compounding, back-formation, conversion, blend, coinage, folk etymology, and euphemism. At the University of Virginia he said he was trying to render four separate dialects: that of the educated Southerner, of the poor white, of the Southern Negro, and of the Negro who moved from South to North. Informal vocabulary in his works extends from mild colloquialism like fetch (Negro, *Requiem for a Nun)* and yon *(Absalom, Absalom!)* through general slang like jazzing *(The Mansion)* and bollix *(The Reivers)* to a rich display of Southernisms: sawchunk for short log *(The Unvanquished),* hound for the lower front brace of a wagon *(The Hamlet),* beggar lice *(The Sound and the Fury),* leastways *(Intruder in the Dust),* chaps for children *(The Hamlet),* and projeckin' with for meddling (Negro, *The Sound and the Fury).* Pussel-gutted, meaning bloated *(The Hamlet)* is a compound presumably from the fatty weed pursley or purslane. Examples of back-formation are to sull (as though the -en of sullen were a suffix, *The Sound and the Fury),* mirate, from admiration (John Faulkner, *My Brother Bill),* and to become abolished, from abolitionism (Negro, *The Unvanquished*—Loosh proclaims, "I done been abolished"). Functional shift often converts adjective to verb: gaunted *(Knight's Gambit),* desperated ("he was desperated up to something," *Light in August),* and soupled ("[he was] soupled out flat," *Go Down, Moses).*

Always fascinating are the kinds of words known as blends or portmanteau words. Examples are agoment (from agony and torment, *The Town),* mizzling (mist and drizzling, *Uncle Willy),* squinching (squinting and wincing or winching, *Light in August),* and scrooched (screwed, scrounged, and crouched, Negro, *Sartoris).* Some terms seem to be original creations, like hoicked and hipering in *The Town* ("she hoicked him from between his plow-handles" and "he come hipering across the square") and pugnuckling and bobbasheely in *The Reivers.* Bob-

basheely, intransitive verb meaning to meander, presumably derives from the name of a crooked little river in Mississippi. By folk or popular etymology Grover, the cook's son in "Afternoon of a Cow," suffers a name-change to Rover, vagrancy is rendered fragrancy *(The Reivers),* ambush and-bush *(Uncle Willy),* hermaphroditic hemophilic *(The Wild Palms),* Château Thierry Shatter Theory *(The Mansion),* and sardine "sour dean" *(The Reivers).* Likewise in *The Reivers* "Blew Law" is explained in terms of proscription of the occasions when the folks "blewed in all the money Saturday night." Euphemism is accomplished by either metaphor or omission. Of his wife's pregnancy to the Baptist deacon in "That Evening Sun," Jesus "said it was a watermelon that Nancy had under her dress." I. O. Snopes said in *The Hamlet:* "The Snopes name has done held its head up too long in this country to have no such reproaches against it like stock-diddling." In *The Mansion* Faulkner speaks of the trouble since Eula "(or whoever it was) found the first hair on her bump" and of the pressure on her father to marry her off quickly "if he didn't want a woods colt in his back yard next grass." Censorship by omission takes place in *The Hamlet* when Houston is represented as saying "—t"[5] and in *The Mansion* when Linda speaks to Stevens, " 'But you can me,' she said. That's right. She used the explicit word, speaking the hard brutal guttural in the quacking duck's voice."[6]

The most common morphological features are the strong conjugation of a weak verb and the inflectional ending —en. There appear holp for helped *(Uncle Willy),* clumb for climbed *(The Hamlet),* skun for skinned *(Go Down, Moses),* and, a dialectal preterit for a strong verb, druv for drove *(The Hamlet).* Occasionally a strong verb will be conjugated weak: taken for took and shaken for shook *(Uncle Willy).* To verbs, conjunctions, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns an —n or —en ending may be attached: hopen for hope ("had hopened," *Light in August),* "let him get offen this ground and quieten hit" *(The Hamlet),* unlessen *(The Reivers),* "my blooden children" *(As I*

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[5] William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York: Random House, 1931), p. 63.

[6] William Faulkner, *The Mansion* (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 238.

Lay Dying), and "likely it ain't fitten for hawgs," "Ab turned the team outen the road," and ourn, yourn, and theirn *(The Hamlet).*

Abundantly present in most of the greatest imaginative literature are symbols and tropes. When queried in Virginia concerning the consciousness of his symbolism, Faulkner characteristically disclaimed most of what critics have discovered but confessed to Old Ben the bear in *Go Down, Moses,* as a symbol of "the vanishing wilderness" and the little fyce dog of the "indomitable spirit of man." Other symbols called such in his books include Flem Snopes's "tiny machine-made black bow" tie and the sex-symbols the "steel-and-wood" plow and the automobile; objects so identified by critics are Jewel's horse in *As I Lay Dying,* the hearth as home, love, and domestic continuity in "The Fire and the Hearth," the sword-cross and the bird in *A Fable,* and the phallus in *Pylon.* Figures of speech are metaphor (the boys sniffing about Eula Varner in *The Hamlet* are "two-legged feice"; in impregnating his wife in *Sanctuary* a man is said to have "laid a crop by"); simile ("loverlike," of Old Ben in *Go Down, Moses;* "like a roach up a drainpipe" in *The Hamlet;* and extended or epic similes especially, perhaps, in *A Fable);* metonymy ("I been watching the dripping sterns of steaks for two days now," *The Hamlet);* hyperbole (the frontiersmen came "roaring with Protestant scripture and boiled whiskey," *Requiem for a Nun;* "we first saw Mrs. Snopes walking in the Square giving off that terrifying impression that in another second her flesh itself would burn her garments off, leaving not even a veil of ashes between her and the light of day," *The Town);* synaesthesia ("My nose could see gasoline," *The Sound and the Fury,* and "What's that sound I smell?", *The Town);* and onomatopoeia ("Chuck, Chuck, Chuck, of the adze," *As I Lay Dying,* and "Hush Hush of the sea" in "Once Aboard the Lugger."[7]

Agreement, syntax, and phraseology are likewise areas in which linguistic exuberance can function. Verbs may not agree with their subjects ("a man dont," *The Hamlet,* and "I gots,"

[7]*Contempo,* I, No. 17 (February 1, 1932), 4.

Go Down, Moses) and pronouns with their antecedents (molasses they, *Intruder in the Dust).* Words are omitted ("ought to taken," *As I Lay Dying),* inserted ("on a credit," *Pylon),* and substituted for others ("in course," *The Reivers,* and "to be shut of," *The Town).* There are the double negative (not nothing, *The Hamlet),* the group plural ("the poor son of a bitches," *The Mansion),* and the reversal in logic ("it ain't that it is, that itches you," *The Hamlet),* and "He should be lawed for treating her so," *As I Lay Dying).* Some of Faulkner's pet phrases, critics say, are overused, like "maniacal fury" in *Pylon* and "the yearly pageant-rite of the old bear's furious immortality," *Go Down, Moses.* From religion comes Doc Hines's "bitchery and abomination!" *(Light in August)* and the Reverend Shegog's "I got de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb!" *(The Sound and the Fury).* From folksong, drama, and litany comes Mollie Beauchamp's antiphonal intonation in *Go Down, Moses:*

> Sold him in Egypt and now he dead.
> Oh yes, Lord. Sold him in Egypt.
> Sold him in Egypt.
> And now he dead.
> Sold him to Pharaoh.
> And now he dead.

In two novels, *Sartoris* and *The Sound and the Fury,* Faulkner employs the folkway and expression "Chris' mus gif'." Another phrase, this one based on superstition and remedy, is "the hair of the dog," *As I Lay Dying.* This is an imaginative extension of an ancient cure for dog bite, the application to the wound of some burned hair from the offending dog. Early this was stretched to allude to the morning drink to cure hangover and then to any drink, as among the Southwestern yarnspinners—"Having taken a couple of fingers of 'har.'" Skeet MacGowan uses the expression for his promised cure of pregnant Dewey Dell Bundren. Other spectacular phrases are "projeckin' with" *(The Sound and the Fury)* to mean tampering with, "with a hand full of gimme and a mouth full of much oblige" *(The Town),* "Ah wouldn't ruint no dog chunkin' hit" ("Pantaloon in Black"), "fish, or cut bait" *(Knight's Gambit:*

either take action yourself or assist someone else to accomplish something), and "tear meat or squeal" *(Absalom, Absalom!:* one must either attack or suffer the pains of being attacked).

Approximately a third of the titles of his works Faulkner drew from folk literature. One is from a translation of the Greek epic: *As I Lay Dying* from the *Odyssey.* Four are from Greek mythology: *The Marble Faun,* "Damon and Pythias," "Mr. Icarius," and "Centaur in Brass." Four are Biblical, not to mention the "Father Abraham" that was an unpublished predecessor of *The Hamlet* and "If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem," a deleted title of *The Wild Palms: Absalom, Absalom!,* "Out of Nazareth," "The Kingdom of God," and "Hand upon the Waters." Four are from folksongs: *Go Down, Moses,* "That Evening Sun," "Frankie and Johnny," and "Yo Ho and Two Bottles of Rum." Two are folklore genre and an example of it: *A Fable* and "Country Mice." Three are connected with luck: *These 13,* "Chance," and "Cheest" (tout's slang for Jesus). Two are derived from folk phraseology: *Light in August* and "Gold Is Not Always." One, *The Reivers,* is Scottish dialect. Four have to do with sport: *Knight's Gambit,* "Fox Hunt," "Bear Hunt," and "Fool about a Horse." Five are nicknames: *Old Man,* "The Kid Learns," "Monk," "Elly," and "Uncle Willy." One is custom: "Shingles for the Lord"; one is a magic object: *The Wishing Tree;* one is symbol: "A Rose for Emily"; one is from Persian folklore: "Lizards in Jamshyd's Courtyard"; and the last is "Golden Land."

The eighth and last group of picturesque Faulknerisms is proverbs, that basic and briefest literary genre. He uses proverbs in two connections: to contribute appropriate atmosphere to a scene, and to ridicule a certain type of odious character, most often I. O. Snopes. The Indian chief Ikkemotubbe observed, "A woman's fancy is like a butterfly which, hovering from flower to flower, pauses at the last as like as not where a horse has stood." In *Knight's Gambit* we read: "Never prescribe for a physician nor invite a postman to a walk" and "There ain't nowhere you can hide from either lightning or love." Old man Will Falls observes in *Sartoris:* "Deestruction's like ary other coward. Hit won't strike a feller that's a-lookin' hit in the eye

lessen he pushes hit too clost," and Uncle Will Varner in *The Hamlet:* "There's a pill for every ill but the last one" and "Breathing is a sigh-draft dated yesterday." Of Varner it is asserted "that a milder-mannered man never bled a mule or stuffed a ballot-box."[8] In *The Town* Flem Snopes is imagined as stating: "It's like my old pappy used to say: Two traps will hold twice as many coons as one trap," and Ratliff in *The Mansion* utters the wellerism "As the feller says, any spoke leads sooner or later to the rim."

With I. O. Snopes the mouthing, mangling, and misapplication of worn saws is a way of life and a characterization tool. "Save the hoof and save all. . . . Love me, love my horse, beggars can't be choosers, if wishes were horseflesh we'd all own thoroughbreds. . . . Sin's in the eye of the beholder, cast the beam outen your neighbors' eyes and out of sight is out of mind" *(The Hamlet).* "Even a fool wont tread where he jest got through watching somebody else get bit" *The Town).* On one occasion in *The Hamlet* Ratliff became so outdone with I. O. that he began ridiculing him in his own coin, far more imaginatively, using the trenchant puns that are out of I. O.'s reach: "Off with the old and on with the new; the old job at the old stand, maybe a new fellow doing the jobbing but it's the same old stern getting reamed out?...Big ears have little pitchers, the world beats a track to the rich man's hog-pen but it ain't every family has a new lawyer, not to mention a prophet. Waste not want not, except that a full waist dont need no prophet to prophesy a profit and just whose."

[8] Based on Byron's description of Lambro the pirate, *Don Juan,* Canto Three, Stanza XLI: "He was the mildest manner'd man / That ever scuttled ship or cut a throat."